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EXPLORING THE CAUSES OF SANSKRIT'S DECLINE

(A PILOT STUDY)

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ABSTRACT

Today Mother India is in tears to see its greatest heritage "Sanskrit" sinking into oblivion as only 14135 people have been found to be associated with Sanskrit as their native language. Hence, the objective of this study is to explore all the major affective factors that attributed to the decay of Sanskrit and putting this most revered language in deplorable condition and doleful state. In attaining the stated objective, the study employed unstructured interview (with 15 Sanskrit scholars) and content analysis as two primary data gathering tools. As for data analysis, the study used descriptive statistics and analytic induction. The study revealed 12 affective factors that caused degeneration of Sanskrit. Five of them are worth mentioning here. (i) Subjugation of Indian Philosophy, (ii) Lack of Career Prospect (iii) Confinement of Sanskrit to Brahmins, (iv) Political Bias, and (v) Spreading Myths about Complexity of Sanskrit.

KEYWORDS: Sanskrit, Primary Data, Philosophy & Spreading Myths

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Original Article

INTRODUCTION

This ethnographic survey study, in its present stage, aims to identify only factors that caused decline of Sanskrit language vis-à-vis Sanskrit education. Until British started ruling India, secular education was imparted through Sanskrit language and Sanskrit texts and the purpose of education was knowledge and character building. When the British introduced English language and English education system for the purpose of administration, job opportunity became the prime criteria and the sidelining and decline of Sanskrit language and Sanskrit education became very severe and rapid. Pertinently, this study aims to identify the chief causes for the decline of Sanskrit.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for the reason that it aims to unearth various causes from different socio-cultural perspectives that account for the decline of Sanskrit. Secondly, the study presents the empirical perceptions of the rural and urban respondents towards Sanskrit language.

Literature Review

Although, extensive literature already abounds pertaining the causes of the decline of Sanskrit, but there lacks a convincing literature based on empirical reflections of social respondents based on a perception study. While looking at the relevant literature, it is desirable to give a brief description of, five level indicators of language at risk (see figure-1) by Crystal's (2000). The first level is safe; the second is viable which indicates that its population base is sufficiently large and it is likely to survive to a long term. As for viable but small, such a language has more than 1000 speakers and is spoken in communities that are isolated but aware of their linguistic

identity. As for endangered language, it is spoken by fairly good number of people in favourable circumstances and with a growth in community so that survival of the language could be possible. The last layer is nearly extinct which is thought to be beyond the possibility of survival because such a language is spoken by few elderly people. Now if we look at the status of Sanskrit, it is viable but small. So it is a good news that Sanskrit is still not an endangered language nor we should let it be because Sanskrit for me is not merely a language. It is a tool for enlightenment, it a healing language. It is a language of divinity and introspection. In this regard, I would like to give you a glimpse of what views the world holds about Sanskrit.

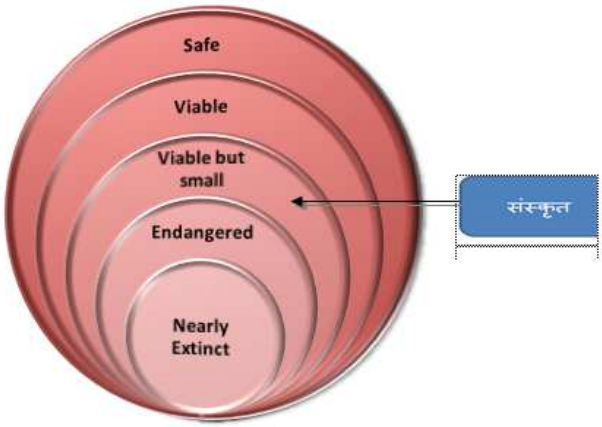


Figure 2: Five Level Indicators of Languages at Risk

Given the towering significance of Sanskrit, it is also desirable to state some world Views on Sanskrit as follows:

"The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin and more exquisitely refined than either: yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs, and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all without believing them to have sprung from some common source which perhaps no longer exists..."

Sir William Jones

Without the knowledge of Sanskrit, education of an Indian would be incomplete.

Mahatma Gandhi

Sanskrit literature is so vast that human life would not be sufficient to make oneself acquainted with any considerable part of Sanskrit literature.

Har Bilas Sarda

"India is the motherland of our race and Sanskrit, the mother of Europe's languages, the mother of our philosophy; the mother of the ideals embodied in Christianity; mother through the village community, of self-government and democracy.

Will Durant, *Eminent Historian*

"India, with more than five hundred spoken dialects, has only one sacred language: Sanskrit that is the only repository of knowledge and the only quarry whence the requisite materials may be obtained for improving the vernaculars or for expressing important religious and scientific ideas."

Sir Monier Monier-Williams

"The literature of the Sanskrit language incontestably belongs to a highly cultivated people, whom we may with great reason consider to have been the most informed of all the Epics.

Arnold Hermann Ludwig Heeran

"There is no language in the world, even Greek, which has the clarity and the philosophical precision of Sanskrit," adding that " India is not only at the origin of everything she is superior in everything, intellectually, religiously or politically."

Frederich Von Schlegel, German philosopher

Sanskrit, the world's oldest spiritual language is the only unambiguous spoken language on the planet.

NASA

"Sanskrit is the most convenient language for computer software programming."

Forbes Magazine, (July, 1987)

Despite having so much of glory and eminent past, today, this language is in peril which can be seen as statement of problem below.

Statement of the Problem:

Mother India is in tears to see its greatest heritage "Sanskrit" sinking into oblivion as only 14135 people according to 2011 census have been found to be associated with Sanskrit as their native language. And this is the point of departure for this study which can be seen in the form of the research question.

Question of the Study

1. What are the factors that put a language at risk of extinction?

Methodology

This study has used mixed research design as it investigates the case both qualitatively and quantitatively. In response to the research question, this perception study used two data gathering tools. One was content analysis for which I 12 articles on the pertinent issues were used as the secondary data source to understand possible causes that are responsible for the decline of Sanskrit; whereas, the primary source of data was semi-structured interview in which 15 scholars of Sanskrit were interviewed not only to know their views on the decline Sanskrit but more importantly to what extent do they agree with the 15 causes which were explored as part of content analysis. So, coming to the key findings, the content analysis reported these 15 causes that are responsible for the decline of Sanskrit.

Findings and Analysis

The study revealed fifteen affective factors that caused decline of Sanskrit as follows.

Confinement of Sanskrit to Brahmins and Priests (CSBP)

It is a matter of fact that Sanskrit could not become the language of the masses in great many parts of India primarily because it remained largely confined to the literary genius of religious and spiritual minds. The reason was not that the poor or the less affluent do not deserve to practice Sanskrit but the fear of distortion of spoken Sanskrit was so high that minor mistakes in pronunciation could destroy the unique character of Sanskrit as language of divinity. Even today the

tradition of chants of vedic hymns and mantras require strict obediences of the sounds. As a result, some respondents also believed that due to puritan mindset of Brahmins, Sanskrit could not develop as an inclusive language and it always remained the language of the chosen few.

Some respondents also believed that such a puritan approach of Brahmins also invited other religions to come into existence. The prominent among them were Buddhism and Jainism. These religions were much more accommodative. They provided an alternative to the people belonging to the lower strata of the society to come into their fold.

Decreasing Number of Native Speakers (DNNS)

I will skip this factor as I have already stated in my statement of the problem that today the number of native speakers, as per 2011 census, has reduced to around 12000 only.

Fear of Learning Difficulties (FLD)

This factor was considered responsible for the decline of Sanskrit by 72% respondents. They believed that due to Rote learning, memorizing of word declensions and the learning language through rules ended up in creating an atmosphere that Sanskrit is very difficult to learn.

Grammar Translation Method (GTM)

Language teaching has undergone many changes in its pedagogical approach. But more often than not Sanskrit teachers adopt the same age-old GTM. From the time British introduced English education system in India till date; the primary objective of Sanskrit learning was and has been "to understand Sanskrit literature and to translate it into English and other Indian languages". More than five lakh Sanskrit teachers in school education, higher education and traditional education are the products of the "Grammar Translation Method", while they can understand Sanskrit, most of them cannot communicate in Sanskrit, There are Sanskrit classes, but there is no use of Sanskrit as a 'language', there are Sanskrit departments, but there is no communication in Sanskrit as a 'language', there are Sanskrit Vidyalayas and Mahavidyalayas, but there is no environment of Sanskrit as a 'language', there are Sanskrit Universities without the vibration of Sanskrit as a 'language'.

Every Indian language is taught through that language. The only exception is Sanskrit which is one of the root causes of the decline of Sanskrit. More than understanding Sanskrit literature, today Sanskrit needs to be taught as a vibrant living language and as an effective medium of communication. Teaching Sanskrit through Sanskrit means making teaching method of Sanskrit more 'eclectic' by adopting all the modern methods and approaches to language teaching in order to make Sanskrit learning easy, enjoyable and effective.

When in other languages students are taught to speak and write in those languages within a year, why not in Sanskrit? This is high time to change the way Sanskrit is being taught.

Intra Community Marriage (ICM)

Intra-community marriage came up as a concern from few respondents who held the phenomenon of Native Sanskrit Scholars' marriages within their own community. Such a phenomenon confines Sanskrit speakers to use Sanskrit within a limited environment depriving others to learn from them.

Lack of Economic Activities (LEA)

Language, Newspaper & Currency become powerful only when its circulation is high, otherwise; same is the case with Sanskrit. Unless any skill any language throws an economic incentive to its people, it cannot thrive. And Sanskrit lacks in this regard.

Lack of Promoting Sanskrit Studies Centre (LPSSC)

Well it is an irony that today the country of Panini the founder of the greatest grammarian the world had known lacks Sanskrit Studies Centres adequately. In a study by… a large number of Sanskrit teachers in Indian Schools & Colleges have admitted that their teaching has no real value for 99.99% of their students. For lack of real zeal on the part of students to study Sanskrit and partly because of government's dismal attitude towards Sanskrit, today not only Sanskrit teachers are in short supply, but also Sanskrit departments are being closed.

Lack of Interlingual Communication (LIC)

The respondents who held LIC responsible for the decline of Sanskrit believe that the phenomena of code switching and code mixing are important to promote a language. But then, other respondents argued that Sanskrit being a refined language should not be made informal for fear of distorting its originality. They said Sanskrit is a healing language for higher realization.

Lack of Job Prospect (LJP)

As for this factor, it goes without saying that Sanskrit graduates have the limited option of jobs. Thus lesser teachers result in lesser number of students which further impacts the job opportunities and the vicious cycle continues. In most of the cases, Sanskrit teaching posts are rarely filled up once the teacher retires. Poor demand; poor supply.

Lack of Native Teachers (LNT)

The importance of having native teachers can be realized with the fact that almost all the South Asian countries ask for natives of English to teach English in countries like China, Japan, Korea, etc. A native teacher not only ensures linguistic competence but also sociolinguistic and cultural competence for the learners.

Language Change (LC)

The process of language change often involves derivations of a language into several daughter languages leaving the common parent language "nearly extinct or dead". This has happened to Latin which evolved in the forms of French, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, Romanian, etc. The same thing has happened to Geez (a classical language of Ethiopia used only for holy Bible): which gave birth to many Ethiopian tongues like Amharic, Oromo, etc.. And this has happened to our Sanskrit too whose derivatives can be seen in the form of many North and South Indian languages.

Linguistic Jingoism of Indian States (LJIS)

While talking of … it reminds me of a quote by K. M. Munshi who aptly remarked that "without Sanskrit Bharat would be nothing but a bundle of linguistic groups." One respondent who is a great scientist sadly remarked that Parents are left out.

Political Bias (PB)

Almost all the respondents found this factor detrimental in the promotion of Sanskrit.

Globalization of English (GE)

As for globalization of English, almost all the respondents found Globalization of English responsible for the decline of Sanskrit. With its growing popularity, today English there are about 165 variants of English. Many scholars like Crystal, Chen, and many others have confirmed in their studies that today the number of non-native speakers of English is more than the number of native speakers. Though, the surge of English in India could be a good news in the interest of Indian economy, it poses a potential threat to the promotion and preservation of Sanskrit. Not just Sanskrit, English has brought several regional languages of India on the verge of Extinct. Today, English has become the best means of globalization in almost all sectors be it industrial, economic, social, cultural, linguistic, or whatsoever We all know how English has become an indispensable entity in our daily paraphernalia.

Subjugation of Indian Philosophy (SIP)

Indian culture and its philosophy lying in Vedic literature have always been under attack by Alien emperors. And, when sanskriti derivative of Sanskrit (refined) is under attack, there is no question of survival of Sanskrit. One of the main reasons for oblition of Sanskrit especially from India has been primarily because of the long period of foreign rule in India and the dominance of English in the modern times. Mughals came to destroy India's *sanskriti*; whereas, Britishers came to India to extract India's Vedic knowledge by learning Sanskrit. Pertinently, it is desirable to cite the statement of Lord Macaulay who said about India in 1835 in British Parliament.

"I have traveled across the length and breadth of India and I have not seen one person who is a beggar, who is a thief. Such wealth I have seen in this country, such high moral values, people of such calibre, that I do not think we would ever conquer this country, unless we break the very backbone of this nation, which is her spiritual and cultural heritage, and, therefore, I propose that we replace her old and ancient education system, her culture, for if the Indians think that all that is foreign and English is good and greater than their own, they will lose their self-esteem, their native self-culture and they will become what we want them, a truly dominated nation."

Although, Britishers paid lots of interest in Sanskrit, but as we moved on in post independence era our love for English from nursery to tertiary level became a serious cause in the decline of Sanskrit.

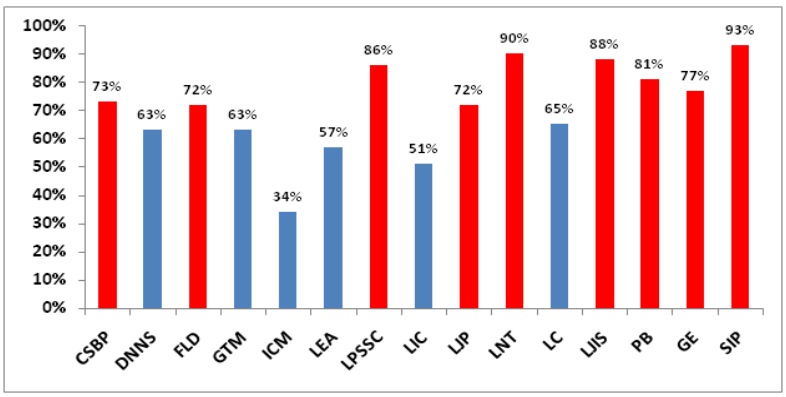


Figure 2: The Degrees of Responsible Factors in Sanskrit's Decline

The bar chart above shows the extent of 15 causal factors that are responsible for the decline of Sankrit language and Sanskrit studies in India. It is imperative to mention here that all the factors shown in red are highly responsible as they exceeded the degree of 70%. Another noteworthy fact here is SIP proved to be the most responsible and ICM the least responsible factor in the decline of Sanskrit.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, there is a great disconnect and wide gap between Sanskrit education and main stream education. Hence there is a great difficulty in promoting interdisciplinary studies in Sanskrit institutions. Sanskrit being the most scientific language of the world need to be nurtured now that we have understood the value and wealth of communication especially man and machine communication of the kind that we require to unvail the new layers of science and new vistas of technology. Sanskrit is the only language by studying which we can refine our sanskar or good conduct. Sanskrit gives Sanskar and Sanskar results into Sanskriti (culture).

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